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SUBJECT: OVERVIEW OF BRUNEI'S HAJJ PILGRIMS

**¶1.** (SBU) SUMMARY: The Government of Brunei (GoB) is committed to supporting the Hajj pilgrimage for Bruneian citizens, including recent converts to Islam. As Brunei's pilgrims return, it is useful to highlight how the GoB supports the annual Hajj pilgrimage. This year, there were 766 official Brunei Hajj pilgrims. Amongst the pilgrims were thirty-three medical and Hajj liaison officers. Concerns about H1N1 flu prompted additional medical officers. The Hajj pilgrims were given priority to receive H1N1 virus vaccination from the GoB's limited supply. In addition, the Sultan of Brunei opened his palace to the pilgrims for lavish departure meals. The Sultan, along with the Royal Family, met with the pilgrims and he awarded twelve new Muslim converts BND9, 300 (USD6, 700) for performing their Hajj pilgrimage. The preferential treatment shown to those undertaking and completing the hajj is reflective of the Sultan and the GoB's support for Malay Islamic Monarchy (MIB) belief system and the importance of the Hajj within MIB. End Summary.

HEALTH AND WELFARE CONCERNS: H1N1

**¶2.** (SBU) The Government of Brunei (GoB) places a high priority on ensuring Brunei Hajj pilgrims' health and welfare. Of the 766 people performing this year's hajj pilgrimage, 33 were medical and Hajj liaison officers. Due to H1N1 flu concerns, Hajj pilgrims were the first group of Bruneians to receive the H1N1 vaccinations. The Ministry of Health also provided the Hajj group with more Tamiflu, antibiotics, and other medications than in previous years.

**¶3.** (SBU) The Hajj Management Department within the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MoRA) and the Brunei's government hospital H1N1 committee advised senior citizens, patients with chronic disease, pregnant mothers and children under 12 yrs old to postpone their Hajj plans. Performing the Hajj involves a lot of physical challenges that would weaken the immune system for the high-risk group potentially making them more prone to H1N1 infection, according to the GoB. The MoRA Hajj Department senior officer stated that 300 intending pilgrims under the high-risk group postponed their Hajj trip for this year. H1N1 likely caused a 14 percent drop in the total number of Hajj pilgrims.

TRAVEL AND RELIGIOUS PREPARATIONS

**¶4.** (SBU) The MoRA and its Hajj Management Department is responsible for coordinating Brunei Hajj pilgrims travel. This year, five travel agencies were chosen by the MoRA to provide full service Hajj travel packages. Royal Brunei Airlines (RBA) operated four specially chartered flights to Medina. The Minister of Religious Affairs, Pehin Zain, and Deputy Minister, Pehin Badarudin, greeted each pilgrim prior to departure at the Brunei airport.

**¶5.** (SBU) It is compulsory for intending Hajj pilgrims to attend a Hajj course prior to their trip to Saudi Arabia. The course is provided by the MoRA Hajj Management Department along with the Islamic Da'wah Centre providing additional courses to new Muslim converts. The courses address the rules and regulations on how to perform the Hajj rites.

SPECIAL BENEFITS FOR HAJJ PILGRIMS

**16.** (SBU) Every Hajj season, the Sultan of Brunei awards new Muslim converts fully funded Hajj airfare. This year, His Majesty awarded twelve new converts BND 3,500. Each Muslim convert also received an additional BND 5, 800 to pay for the full Hajj travel package as well as providing spending money. In total, each recipient received BND 9, 300 (USD 6,700). The Sultan also awards the Hajj fare to all Muslim government officers who have more than 15 years of government service. It is an entitlement that Muslim government officer who can choose to claim, if they wish. In addition, Brunei military personnel and civilian staff at the Royal Brunei Armed Force Headquarters and bases and the Ministry of Defense who intend to perform the Hajj pilgrimage, on top of the Hajj fare privileges, also receive cash donations and medical care. Some local companies would also provide Hajj fares to their local Muslim employees who have worked with the company for more than 15 years.

**17.** (SBU) The Sultan and royal family members personally met with intending Hajj pilgrims at the Istana Nurul Iman. This year, the Sultan presented 'ihram' clothing to the men and a suit of 'telkong' to the women making the Hajj. Pilgrims are provided a lavish meal as well as opportunity to greet the Sultan and royal family members prior to their departure. The event was widely covered in the local media.

COMMENT

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**18.** (SBU) The Sultan and the GoB place a special emphasis on the Hajj. The financial support is an important component of the program as well as an opportunity for the Sultan to publicly show his support for this fundamental element of the Islamic faith. Support for the Hajj is part of the government's overall efforts to sustain the Malay Islamic Monarchy (MIB) belief system.

TODD